

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS ABOUT NATIONAL PARK SERVICE WILDERNESS

1. What is wilderness?

“Wilderness” is a place unaffected by people where nature alone governs. Wilderness today is largely an ideal. Human behavior and actions so pervade the planet that we can scarcely find any unaffected place on Earth. Still, places remain where the forces of nature dominate and where human influences are minimal. We call these places “wilderness.” Wilderness is uninhabited. Wilderness is undeveloped. Wilderness is found in large chunks in remote corners of the world. We find wilderness in smaller fragments close to the places we live.

The number and size of wild areas throughout the world and at home are declining as populations increase and we require more food, fuel and forests. Some wild areas in America are preserved as national and state parks, forests or refuges. But even these wild areas are subject to development pressure to serve recreation or other needs. Congress acted in 1964 to designate wilderness by law. The Wilderness Act of 1964 led to the designation of over 44 million acres of national park lands as “wilderness.”

2. How is wilderness different from all other Federal lands in this country?

Designated wilderness is the highest form of conservation status that Federal lands may possess. Only Congress may designate wilderness and the National Park Service is obligated to manage wilderness areas to preserve, and where possible, to restore their wild character. With some exceptions, the Wilderness Act prohibits roads, commercial enterprises, motor vehicles, mechanical transport and buildings and structures in designated wilderness. Wilderness differs from all other Federal lands because Congress demands that wilderness remain substantially affected by the forces of nature and largely free of human intervention.

3. Why is designated wilderness needed in a national park?

Until Congress passed the Wilderness Act in 1964, the undeveloped or wild areas of parks (often referred to as “backcountry”) were susceptible to development and intrusion of roads, or motor vehicles capable of travelling off roads. The only protection that backcountry possessed was found in a park’s plans. But these plans could be changed to accommodate development. The National Park Service was not bound by any enforceable restrictions on how to manage the backcountry. The Wilderness Act changed that. The Wilderness Act, with limited administrative and property rights exceptions, removes the NPS ability to develop or allow incompatible uses of wilderness.

Without wilderness protection, parks would likely see development or motor vehicles slowly nibble away at the backcountry. Without wilderness protection, the NPS would

have much more latitude in managing a park's undeveloped areas, including taking actions that diminish its wildness.

4. What's the value of wilderness? Who needs it? What good is it?

That is like asking, "What is the value of the Mona Lisa or of the Taj Mahal." The human race would continue to live and thrive without the Mona Lisa or the Taj Mahal. So, in that sense, who needs them? But, who would deny that such works of art enrich the lives of all fortunate enough to see them? We do not live by bread alone. So it is with wilderness. Wilderness preserves the places where natural forces are dominant. Even where those forces produce land and seascapes that appear empty and desolate, they produce beauty and grandeur that are overpowering. There are so many reasons why we need wilderness that it would take a book to properly explain them. Aside from enriching life with untouched natural beauty, wilderness has practical benefits. It helps ensure that water supplies are kept clean. Wilderness provides open space in an urbanized world. Wilderness provides a laboratory for research. Wilderness provides an intellectual and emotional counterpoint to our increasingly crowded society.

5. How does wilderness in the park affect me?

Wilderness in the park protects scenery, wildlife and nature so that when you visit, you will find them. And you will find them without the noise and fumes of motor vehicles. If you are like most park visitors, you come to the parks to find clean air, scenic beauty, wildlife in native habitat, and some elbowroom. Wilderness helps ensure that parks preserve these attributes. Because it is wilderness, you will have to work harder to travel into it. You will have to walk or ride a horse. You may face a reservation system because the park has imposed limits on numbers of users. However, the NPS imposes such limits even in nonwilderness, for example, on river permits or campgrounds. Reservations are not necessarily a wilderness feature. Restrictions on how you travel in wilderness are. Other than how you gain access to wilderness, you may enjoy wilderness just as you enjoy other parts of the park. You may hike, fish, camp, birdwatch, photograph or hunt (where legally authorized). You may sit by a campfire and sleep under the stars. The stars will be brighter because the lights of development will be farther away. The sounds of nature will seem louder because they will not be competing with the sounds of development.

6. Where can I get more information about wilderness?

This website contains information about wilderness in each of the national parks that contain wilderness. You will find more detailed information on wilderness in each park by going to the website for that park. First go to www.nps.gov and then follow the cues to individual parks. You may also call each park with wilderness and speak to the wilderness ranger or office. If you want more knowledge about the concept and history of wilderness generally, there is much information on this website including a reading list and the section titled "The Idea of Wilderness" that will give you a good start.

Comprehensive information on wilderness areas outside the National Park System can be obtained at the University of Montana's *Wilderness Information Network* at www.wilderness.net.